

## CHAPTER 2: THE ANCESTOR CULT IN SOUTH AFRICA

### (1) Introduction

The cult of the ancestors is deeply rooted in Southern African tradition - a tradition predating European colonial expansion and missionary effort in the subcontinent. Inseparable from the cult is the belief in a supreme God. However, the Christian missionary effort beginning in the 18th Century saw fit to suppress the cult in favour of the Western Christian religious paradigms. In so doing, a profound spiritual resource was driven underground to the detriment of African Christian life. The cult is now resurgent and offers hope of a fresh approach to theology in the context of the crisis of AIDS in South Africa.

In this chapter I will begin with a consideration of the present extent of the cult of the ancestors in Southern Africa, to show that it is worthy of consideration as a contemporary religious phenomenon in the context of the AIDS crisis. I will then approach a working definition of the cult, analyse, expand and qualify it. I then consider the criteria by which a number of South African groups determine who becomes an ancestor. The definition and criteria together render a rather dry formal overview, with no sense of the lived experience. In order to illustrate what the cult means to the people who live it, I conclude the chapter by situating the cult in the wider worldview of which it forms a part.

Apart from the problem of trying to understand a religious experience from the point of view of a non-participant, there is another obvious hermeneutical obstacle in our approach: Because there are so few first-hand "user accounts" of the cult, I shall necessarily be restricted to the accounts of the cult recorded by anthropologists and missionaries. The latter are, for theological rhetorical purposes, almost universally disparaging in their tone, while the former treat the cult as a phenomenon to be examined from the outside and explained through their Western interpretive filter. Despite these obstacles, I believe that it is a worthwhile exercise, which conveys the value of the cult in terms of a source of moral injunction and of an optimistic communitarian eschatological horizon.

## (2) Extent of the Cult of the Ancestors

The cult of the ancestors has historically been practised by all the Bantu<sup>1</sup> groups of South Africa who speak 'Bantu' languages. It is a form of religion that is spread widely across the whole continent among all but a few groups. In South Africa in particular, the groups which did not historically practice the cult of their ancestors were the San and the Khoikhoi.<sup>2</sup> The San now live mostly in the Northern Cape and in the Kalahari desert in Botswana. The Khoikhoi have mostly been assimilated into other groups, and, in so far as they still exist, have taken on the religious practices of their neighbours.

In 1913, H. Dieterlen encouraged the catechist or evangelist of the Evangelical Church to criticize but not to insult or mock Sotho traditions and customs. Their time is over and the day of the Lord has dawned.<sup>3</sup> One might be inclined to copy Dieterlen in thinking of the cult of the ancestors as an atavistic remnant of a bygone pre-Christian magical age which has neither relevance nor adherents in the modernised South Africa. The cult might thus be considered as irrelevant, practised only by a few diehards of a

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1. 'Bantu' is a linguistic term. It refers to languages structured on numerous classes of nouns recognised by their prefix. Euphonic concords link the noun to its verb and adjectives. These concords also govern the form taken by the adjective.

The Bantu languages in South Africa are divided into two 'groups' and in addition to these, there are a couple of other single languages which do not form part of groups in the country, but have links to languages in the neighbouring countries of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The Nguni group is represented by Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Ndebele and has the greatest number of people who speak these languages. The Sotho group comprises Southern Sotho (Sotho), Northern Sotho (Pedi) and Tswana. There are also cross-over languages, like Bhaca, which contain elements of both the Nguni and the Sotho groups. The non-group languages are Venda and Tsonga. The indigenous non-Bantu languages in South Africa are the dialects of Khoisan. These are also spoken in Botswana and Namibia.

It must also be noted here that the question of language and group is a minefield of sensitivities. Why, for example, did the apartheid government recognise some languages as such, and yet only accord official status to English and Afrikaans, preferring the other languages to be spoken in 'homelands' of which speakers of these languages were citizens? What criteria were used by the present government in recognising only 11 official languages? As this is not a thesis about language, we shall not explore this question at greater length.

2. Kiernan says: "[N]either the San nor the Khoikhoi had any clear idea of what such an afterlife might be. The influence of the dead was mischievous, often being the cause of illness, but there was no organised cult of the dead remotely approaching ancestor worship." See Jim Kiernan, "African Traditional Religions in South Africa," in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, edited by Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 17.

3. H. Dieterlen, *Bukana ea 'moleli* (Morija: Sesuto Book Depot, 1913), 89.

passing generation, and not worthy of consideration in our response to the AIDS pandemic.

It is the purpose of this first section to disabuse the reader of this misconception, and to demonstrate that the cult is of great relevance even to highly 'modern' young people. This section will consider seven studies from the past two decades showing that the cult of the ancestors is not relegated to the history books, but that it still thrives in rural as well as urban areas. The studies will be presented in chronological order, and not in any rank of importance or persuasiveness.

#### (a) Manona

In 1981, Manona<sup>4</sup> was convinced that the cult was resurgent after years of Christians dissociating themselves from the power of the ancestors. He based his conclusions on surveys he had done in Grahamstown and in the Ciskei in 1980. He did not provide hard numeric evidence for his claim, but had the general impression that Christians were reclaiming what previous generations had abandoned. The reasons he advances for this resurgence are telling: "The development is inspired not by conservatism among the people but by a conviction that what the earlier generations of Christians abandoned was right and valuable."<sup>5</sup> It is the purpose of this chapter to evaluate just how 'right and valuable' the cult of the ancestors is in the light of the AIDS pandemic.

#### (b) Kitshoff

Kitshoff<sup>6</sup> is convinced of the continued currency of the cult of the ancestors, even

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4. C.W. Manona, "The Resurgence of the Ancestor Cult Among Xhosa Christians," in *Ancestor Religion in South Africa: Proceedings of a Seminar on Ancestor Belief*, edited by Heinz Kuckertz (Lumko, Transkei: Lumko Missiological Institute, 1981), 34.

5. Manona, "The Resurgence of the Ancestor Cult," 38.

6. M.C. Kitshoff, "Moderne swart jeug se siening oor Christus en voorouers as middelaars," *Ned. Geref. Tielogiese Tydskrif* XXXIII, no. 3 (September 1992): 417–27.

among modern black youth. 51% of the 92 bible college students at the University of Zululand whom he surveyed, believed that ancestral spirits play a mediatory function.<sup>7</sup> He quotes Staples' PhD 1981 findings<sup>8</sup> that more than 75% of the black members of established churches believed that the ancestors are a source of help for them. He ascribes the difference between his finding of 51% and Staples' of 75% to the following factors:

- (i) that the students he surveyed knew the bible
- (ii) that they were not entirely free in their responses to express their true opinions
- (iii) that they were relatively young, so not representative of the wider population
- (iv) that their educational goal (ministry) played a role.

Kitshoff is clear that his survey shows that the cult of the ancestors cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to modern youth. This corresponds to my experience in conversations with young people in Soweto, where I worked for two years, and in chaplaincy to tertiary students for five years. I found that they have a lively interest in the cult of the ancestors, although they are neither universally informed, nor entirely clear on what they mean by the ancestors.

#### (c) Anderson

Drawing on field surveys of 1638 families in Soshanguve township outside Pretoria between 1990 and 1992, Anderson writes:

The ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world. It is not an outmoded belief which is dying out in South Africa's urban areas. The veneration of ancestors is still widely practised in the black townships of South Africa, even though the incidence of the ancestor cult among church members is not as high today as it was thirty years ago. . . . For a great many

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7. According to Kitshoff's analysis, the students see the ancestors' mediatory role variously as parallel to Christ, to the exclusion of Christ, previous to Christ or in Christ. This opens up all sorts of interesting questions regarding mediation and belonging to dual systems, which we shall consider later.

8. R.L. Staples, "Christianity and the Cult of the Ancestors: Belief and Ritual Among the Bantu-Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa. An Interdisciplinary Study Utilizing Anthropological and Theological Analysis," Ph.D. thesis (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1981).

urban black people the ancestors are a reality, to be given due acknowledgement and to whom recourse is had for the provision of felt needs.<sup>9</sup>

A total of 44% of all the families surveyed, practised the ancestor cult, with more members of mainline churches than of Pentecostal churches doing so. Thus Anderson says that in order to be relevant in Africa, Christians have to “respond to the objective reality of ancestors.”<sup>10</sup> This response can be of either confrontation or accommodation and compromise.

(d) Kriel

In in-depth interviews with 256 respondents over a 13-year study in the former Lebowa, ending in July 1990, Kriel had the opportunity to discover the extent of belief in the influence of the ancestors. He asked specifically whether in the respondents’ opinion, the *badimo* (ancestors) can influence the lives and world of people. The replies were tabulated as follows:

	Men	Women	Nurses
Yes, the <i>badimo</i> do influence people and their world	132 (95%)	54 (96%)	41 (67%)
No, the <i>badimo</i> have no influence	6 (4%)	2 (4%)	9 (15%)
Unsure / don't know	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	11 (18%)
Total	139 (100%)	56 (100%)	61 (100%)

**Table 1** Extent of belief in the influence of the ancestors<sup>11</sup>

In response to the question of whether they had had dealings with the ancestors in the previous 12 months, Kriel received the following affirmative replies: men 46%, women 66% and nurses 16%.

9. Allan Anderson, “African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult: Confrontation or Compromise?” *Missionalia* 21, no. 1 (April 1993): 29.

10. Anderson, “African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult,” 37.

11. J.D. Kriel, “*Lewendes, gestorwenes en voorouergeeste in die Noord-Sotho-ontologie*,” *South African Journal of Ethnology* 18, no. 3 (1995): 114.

These two sets of figures indicate the pervasiveness of belief in the ancestors' influence, which is noticeably less among those who have subscribed to Western medical practice. They also show that contact with the ancestors is not a daily occurrence. Indeed not everyone has dealings with the ancestors even once a year. That the women had more dealings with the ancestors can be ascribed to the absence from home of many men for at least part of the year as they are migrant workers.

(e) Dreyer and Mjwabe

On the basis of conversations they conducted, specifically aimed at finding the extent of traditional black religious beliefs, Dreyer and Mjwabe<sup>12</sup> say that the cult of the ancestors is a real part of black culture. While conceding that westernised people do not hold on to the traditions as strongly, they say that the cult is practised in the cities and also in Christian communities. Dreyer and Mjwabe conclude that particular insight into these traditional beliefs is necessary in order for the Gospel to be spread effectively.

(f) Tlhagale

In conversation with Buti Tlhagale<sup>13</sup> on 16 May 2003, he was emphatic that young people do have contact with the cult of the ancestors. In a broad generalisation, Tlhagale claims that when a child is sick, the parents most often turn first to the traditional healer before consulting a Western-style medical practitioner. This applies to practising Christians as well as to those living in urban areas. When somebody begins to develop symptoms of AIDS, therefore, initial diagnoses and prescriptions will be made by a traditional healer, whose stock in trade is in terms of the cult of the ancestors.<sup>14</sup>

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12. W.A. Dreyer and F.E. Mjwabe, "Tradisionele geloof," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 51, no. 2 (June 1995): 554.

13. Buti Tlhagale OMI was Archbishop of Bloemfontein at the time of our conversation, and shortly thereafter was installed as Bishop of Johannesburg. He has written and published extensively on inculturation in the church in South Africa.

14. This is confirmed in the important work by Ncube, which we will consider at length in a subsequent chapter. Ncube writes:

## (g) Denis

Denis reports on wide-ranging interviews conducted with twenty women of whom eight were leaders of women's groups within six mainline Christian churches in Sobantu township outside of Pietermaritzburg.<sup>15</sup> The aim of the report is to show how the women combine their prominent positions in their respective churches, and thus their Christian faith with their African culture and heritage. He concludes in general that "African traditional religion remains a constitutive element of the mental and cultural landscape" even for these women who were so firmly rooted in the Christian practice. Whether they were trying to integrate their customs or oppose them to their church practice, "reference to the religion of the ancestors is unavoidable."<sup>16</sup>

## (h) Conclusion

The above evidence from Manona, Kitshoff, Anderson, Kriel, Dreyer and Mjabwe, Tlhagale and Denis shows that the ancestral cult is not to be dismissed as a bygone relic. Rather it is a vital and widespread dimension of the religious landscape of South Africa. It features in the awareness and practice of ordinary South Africans, including practising Christians. It is thus worthy of consideration in relation to the pervasive problem of AIDS.

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It is when the sickness has shown its category that diviners can identify its aetiology. This section poses a problem in the AIDS pandemic because it can delay a patient to get help immediately but is important to make an awareness of the sick member to the whole family. See Vitus Siphon Ncube, "Towards a Theology of *Ukugula, Ukufa Nokuphumula Ngoxolo* (Sickness Unto Death and Rest in Peace) in Times of HIV-AIDS with a Special Reference to Zulu Concepts of *Ukubhula* (Divination) *Nokuthakatha* (Witchcraft)," dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology (School of Theology at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, supervised by Dr Stuart C. Bate, 2002), 10.

15. The interviews were conducted in 2000 by research assistants of the Sinomlando Oral History Project of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

16. Philippe Denis, "*Chrétiennes et africaines: Le dilemme d'un groupe de femmes sud-africaines*," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 35, no. 1 (January-March 2004): 67.

*Cette étude montre que, pour des femmes aussi fermement enracinées dans la pratique chrétiennes que ces huit dirigeantes de manyanos, la religion traditionnelle africaine demeure un élément constitutif du paysage mental et culturel. Qu'elles soient opposées aux coutumes ou qu'elles cherchent à intégrer celles-ci à la pratique ecclésiale, la référence à la religion des ancêtres est incontournable.*

Schreiter regards this as the second of his three types of dual system.<sup>17</sup> It is pleasing that Schreiter does not consider this to be “syncretism” (which in most contexts carries a pejorative sense.) But I go further than Schreiter and argue that the fact that many people feel compelled to participate in the cult of the ancestors in the face of ecclesiastical censure, indicates that it is inextricably tied up with what it means to be “African.” Thus, the type of “dual belonging” which is seen among Christian adherents of the cult of the ancestors, is of the same type as Christian-Shintos or Christian-Buddhists in Asia. Indeed, I have Jesuit colleagues who say “I am Christian and I am African.” and who do not feel free not to participate in the rituals of their families. What has long been regarded as laxity or lack of commitment, is in fact little recognised as similar to what holds sway in Asia. But this thesis is not attempting to resolve this question.<sup>18</sup>

### (3) Who Are the Ancestors?

For the African, death does not represent an abrupt and total discontinuity of life. A person who has died proceeds to the world of the ancestors, from which he or she still has contact with the living. The dead are intimately involved in the affairs of the living, and depend on their living descendants for their remembrance and continued existence. The

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17. Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 148. Schreiter enumerates (i) Christianity operating alongside another tradition, such as among Native American groups.

(ii) Christianity practiced in its integrity, with selected elements from another system also being practiced. He says this is what happens in (West) Africa, with sacrifices being offered at the shrine of a local spirit or deity, especially in times of distress. People try to “exhaust all possible channels of mediation.” Church leaders see this as incompatible with Christianity, but the local members have no such misgivings.

(iii) “Double belonging” as occurs in Asia, where Christianity is practiced as well as a national religion which is inextricably tied up with citizenship.

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the Roman Catholic Church’s resolution of this third type of dual system was to understand the Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. rites as “civic duty” and thus not a question of religious adherence in conflict with Christianity. But, Phan has said it is the most religious thing that many people do, so its religious dimension should not be denied. See Peter C. Phan, “Culture and Liturgy: Ancestor Veneration as a Test Case,” *Worship* 76, no. 5 (2002): 403–30.

18. For a timely, and I believe very important, contribution to this discussion, I refer the reader to Peter C. Phan, “Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church,” *Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (September 2003): 495–519.

ancestors are concerned with the well-being of their lineage and descendants and are perceived to obtain favours on behalf of their kin.

#### Toward a Definition

The following is a useful initial general grammatical definition and description of ancestors. I shall clarify, analyse and expand on it, in relation particularly to the cult in South Africa.

An ancestor is a named, dead forebear who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance. In ancestor worship such an ancestor receives ritual service and tendance directed specifically to him by the proper class of his descendants. Being identified by name means that he is invested with attributes distinctive of a kind of person.<sup>19</sup>

I should note at the outset that in South Africa ancestors are not exclusively male. Writing in the 1960's, Fortes uses masculine pronouns. His work is mostly with the Ashanti and Tallensi in West Africa, where the ancestors may well all be masculine. In Southern Africa, however, the cult concerns both male and female ancestors. Nxumalo's informant shows that the Zulu are somewhat ambivalent about the ancestral status of women and children. These, he says, are "*in the amadlozi*," but he accords greater status to the fathers and grandfathers.<sup>20</sup>

Mönnig<sup>21</sup> ascribes the lesser awareness of women among the ancestors to the fact that most South African societies have a patrilocal tradition. That is, when women marry, they leave their own homes and go to live with the husband's family. They do not therefore have roots over a number of generations in the home in which they raise their children. While the husband's forebears are remembered more than three or four

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19. Meyer Fortes, "Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship in Africa," in *African Systems of Thought: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Third International African Seminar in Salisbury, December 1960*, edited by M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1965), 124.

20. J.A. Nxumalo, "Zulu Christians and Ancestor Cult - A Pastoral Consideration," in *Ancestor Religion in South Africa: Proceedings of a Seminar on Ancestor Belief*, edited by Heinz Kuckertz (Lumko, Transkei: Lumko Missiological Institute, 1981), 66.

21. H.O. Mönnig, *The Pedi* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1967), 56f.

generations, the wife's forebears may be known only through the rare visit of one of her parents.

It is probably in the '*designated genealogical class*' of Fortes' definition that the cult of the ancestors varies most from one group to another. Among the Nguni, the ancestors to whom cult is offered are more commonly patrilineal. However Hammond-Tooke is unambiguous that in South Africa ancestors are on both sides of the family: "The bilaterality referred to above is much more evident in other Bantu-speaking groups such as Venda, Tsonga and Sotho, especially Sotho of the Lowveld (Lobedu, Kgaga)."<sup>22</sup> So, among the Basotho, our particular study group, ancestors who represent the clan, as well as those who "communicate" are both male and female, on both sides of the family.

Fortes uses the term '*ancestor worship*' of the human relationship towards the ancestors. This is controversial, since for Christians, 'worship' is reserved as an attitude towards God. Others, like Hammond-Tooke, Clarke and Charumbira<sup>23</sup> also choose this term over terms such as 'reverence,' 'venerate,' 'honour,' 'respect,' etc. I shall look into this question of terminology in the present chapter, but until the question is settled, I shall follow Shorter, Lapointe, Triebel and Nyamiti<sup>24</sup> and others in using the theologically less charged term 'venerate' and 'veneration.'<sup>25</sup> When speaking about the relation of people

22. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "The Aetiology of Spirit in Southern Africa," *African Studies* 45, no. 2 (1986): 159.

23. See W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "Do the South Eastern Bantu Worship Their Ancestors?" in *Social System and Tradition in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Eileen Krige*, edited by John Argyle and Eleanor Preston-Whyte (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978), 134–49; also Edith Clarke, "The Sociological Significance of Ancestor-Worship in Ashanti," *Africa* III, no. 4 (1930): 431–71; and Ruramisai Charumbira, "Ancestor Worship: Just Who Is Worshipping Whom? Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on Power and Knowledge About Africa," M.A. Thesis (Robarts Library, OISE/ UT Library: University of Toronto, 2001).

24. See Aylward Shorter, "Conflicting Attitudes to Ancestor Veneration in Africa," *AFER* XI, no. 1 (January 1969): 27–37; also Eugene Lapointe, "Ancestor Veneration and Christian Worship," in *The Church and African Culture: Conference Papers*, edited by Mohlomi Makobane, Bongani Sithole, and Matheadira Shiya (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenod Institute, 1995), 39–52; as well as Johannes Triebel, "Living Together with the Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a Challenge for Missiology," *Missiology: An International Review* XXX, no. 2 (April 2002): 187–97; and Charles Nyamiti, "Ancestor Veneration in Africa," <http://afrikaworld.net/afrel/nyamiti.htm> viewed on 11 March 2002.

25. However, Mtetwa is opposed even to the use of the term 'veneration' because it does not convey what the ancestor-directed rituals represent. He insists that the only way to speak of the cult of the

to their ancestors in general, in a way that does not refer to specific acts of veneration, I shall use the term 'cult' following the example of Nxumalo, Tutu, Becken, Anderson, Daneel, Manona, Staples and others.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to our working definition, Fortes says an ancestor is a *named* forebear. Hammond-Tooke and Kuckertz distinguish between the ancestors in general and particular named ancestors to whom special attention is paid in specific ritual acts.

On the one hand, in routine (ordinary) rituals such as at rites of passage surrounding death, birth, initiation and marriage, or at agricultural occasions like sowing or harvest time, or when decisions have to be made concerning the welfare of the whole family, a kinship group invites or invokes the presence of its entire set of ancestors. This set is often all the descendants of one particular ancestor going back variously four to six generations, depending on the memory of those present and the practice of that particular descent group.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, in times of particular crisis such as illness, barrenness, suffering, misfortune or tragedy, a diviner or traditional healer may diagnose the cause of the suffering as the discontentment of one particular ancestor. Typically, this ancestor is

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ancestors is to use the terms in the original languages: *ukuhlabela amadlozi* (Zulu) or *ukukhumbula izinyanya* (Xhosa) or *go phasa badimo* (Tswana). The weight of these verbs rests respectively on sacrificing, remembering and offering libation. See S. Mtetwa, "African Spirituality in the Context of Modernity," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology: African Theology* 3, no. 2 (1996): <http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/tonyb.htm> viewed on 25 February 2002. We shall continue to use the term 'veneration' and refer in particular to sacrificing, remembering and libation, as appropriate.

26. See Nxumalo, "Zulu Christians and Ancestor Cult.;" also Desmond Mpilo Tutu, "The Ancestor Cult and Its Influence on Ethical Issues," *Ministry* 9, no. 3 (July 1969): 99–104; and Hans-Jürgen Becken, "Beware of the Ancestor Cult: A Challenge to Missiological Research in South Africa," *Missionalia* 21, no. 3 (November 1993): 333–39; as well as Anderson, "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult.;" and M.L. Daneel, "The Christian Gospel and the Ancestor Cult," *Missionalia* 1, no. 2 (1973): 46–73; and Manona, "The Resurgence of the Ancestor Cult.;" and finally Staples, "Christianity and the Cult of the Ancestors."

27. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "Who Worships Whom: Agnates and Ancestors Among Nguni," *African Studies* 44, no. 1 (1985): 47–64 presents a detailed discussion of agnatic descent groups, lineages, clans, kin-groups, etc. among the Nguni. In W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Boundaries and Belief: The Structure of a Sotho Worldview* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1981): 86–87, we have a similar discussion for the Kgaga clan of the Basotho. It is not necessary for us to record the details here, as we will discuss them as the need arises.

angry because some taboo has been broken, or the ancestor has been neglected. Alternatively, an ancestor may communicate directly in a dream with a member of his or her descent group. This is where the particular forebear is '*named*' and stands out from the general collective. '*Ritual service and tendance directed specifically to him,*' is offered to assuage his or her anger. During this ritual, the whole collective of ancestors is invited but the communicating ancestor in particular is named, addressed and mollified.

The '*continued structural relevance*' to which Fortes refers, relates inter alia, to the taboos of marriage within certain degrees of kinship, to expectation of hospitality when on a journey, to laying down norms of behaviour, to the inheritance of property and land, and to defining jural relations. Fortes is much more emphatic on this last point than other writers on the ancestral cult. He says: "*Ancestor worship is a representation or extension of the authority component in the jural relations of successive generations.*"<sup>28</sup> He believes it is neither about the continuation of personal relationships nor about the continued life of an individual. It is rather about maintaining jural and power relationships. Hammond-Tooke says "the fundamental religious objective in the ancestor cult is the sacralization and expression of basic principles of social organization." Among the Cape Nguni, these are respect for genealogical seniority and defining marriage taboos.<sup>29</sup> This functional emphasis is somewhat unique to Fortes and Hammond-Tooke, and is not the way in which the cult is popularly understood in South Africa.

Returning finally to Fortes' definition, for an ancestor to have relevance to the lives of his or her descendants, it is essential that the ancestor be '*invested with attributes distinctive of a kind of person.*' In other words, ancestors are only significant to those who accord them significance of a particular kind. Or as a member of the Independent Pentecostal Church said to Anderson: "Ancestors would only reveal themselves to those people who believed in them."<sup>30</sup> This is not as banal a statement as it might first appear.

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28. Fortes, "Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship," 133.

29. Hammond-Tooke, "Who Worships Whom," 51.

30. Anderson, "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestor Cult," 35.

Depending on the group under consideration, there are a number of criteria a person is expected to fulfil to qualify for being ‘*invested with the attributes distinctive of a kind of person.*’ I examine some of those criteria in the next section.

#### (4) Who Becomes an Ancestor?

The sources are not in complete agreement on what criteria must be fulfilled in order for a person to be considered an ancestor. This is largely because the practice varies considerably among the various groups present in South Africa. Some require only that the deceased person have a fitting funeral. Other groups, like the Zulu, require that the family perform the ceremony of *ukubuyisa* after the period of mourning in order to return the wandering spirit to the homestead. I shall consider briefly some divergent accounts of the requirements for incorporation among the ancestors.

##### (a) Obengo

Obengo concludes his considerations of mainly second-hand accounts of who can become an ancestor thus: “It seems clear from the preceding, therefore, that parenthood, status, funerary rites, and goodness are all significant factors that qualify the departed to become ancestors worthy of worship and with the responsibility of moral guardianship.”<sup>31</sup> I shall examine these criteria in two more systematic works.

##### (b) IMBISA

In 1996, the Standing Committee of the InterRegional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA) met in Botswana to discuss the question of ancestor veneration

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31. Tom Obengo, “The Role of Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religions,” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* (1991): 48. Although succinct, it is clear that this material is not a primary source. This is because Obengo uses authors for this topic, who, with one exception, write at second hand. Obengo’s only first-hand account, that of Bolaji Idowu, is not from the subcontinent. He writes, for example, of a form of judgement by the Deity or the court of the ancestors, akin to canonization to the state of ancestor. I have not come across similar thinking in South Africa, and consider it unrepresentative of the thinking on that part of the continent.

in the subcontinent. They considered the various requirements for 'ancestorhood' in the countries they represent. These they listed as:

[a]n ancestor is a person:

- who died a good death, after having faithfully practised and transmitted to his descendants the laws left to him by his ancestors
- who contributed to the continuation of the line by leaving many descendants
- who was a peacemaker, a link, that fostered communion between the living and the dead, through sacrifice and prayers
- A person who is a first-born is a candidate 'par excellence' to become an ancestor because he is able to maintain the chain of generation in a long genealogy. The right of the first born is thus an inalienable right.<sup>32</sup>

The bishops admit that they have difficulty in speaking of the role of the ancestors, because they are "nowhere and yet everywhere." It is certainly impossible to speak on behalf of all the cultural groups in the subcontinent.

#### (c) Michalek

In line with the thinking of the bishops, that not just any deceased person is "consecrated" an ancestor, Michalek<sup>33</sup> arranges criteria under the heading of four conditions which he calls, 'juridical,' 'moral,' 'formal 1' and 'formal 2.' It is helpful for us to consider these headings:

juridical: one must have descendants, have passed on the gift of life

moral: one must have lived an exemplary life, according to traditional virtues, and being a bridge of unity between people

first formal: one must have had a good natural death, in advanced age, having passed on one's message to one's own, and having had a good burial

second formal: one must have had a sumptuous funeral, after a rite which indicates the passing on of life.

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32. IMBISA Standing Committee, "Who Is an Ancestor in African Traditional Religion?" *AMECEA Documentation Service, Nairobi* (1996), [Http://afrikaworld.net/afre/atr-ancestor.htm](http://afrikaworld.net/afre/atr-ancestor.htm) viewed on 11 March 2002.

33. Adam Michalek, "Christ et ancêtre - Médiateurs en compétition? Approche théologique de la religion traditionnelle africaine," *Verbum SVD* 42, no. 2 (2001): 196f.

The bishops' first criterion corresponds to Michalek's first formal and moral criteria. Their second corresponds to Michalek's juridical criterion.

Their third corresponds again to Michalek's moral criterion.

Their final criterion has no corresponding criterion in Michalek's system.

Similarly Michalek's second formal criterion has no correspondent in the bishops' system.

That these criteria do not perfectly co-incide is a good indication that it is not possible to systematise a cult that firstly is so varied across a vast continent or even subcontinent, and secondly represents the application of an overarching worldview and not a set of principles. So, for example, Michalek agrees that a person might be called an ancestor if he or she does not fulfil the four criteria, but only those who fulfil all four can act as mediator between God and their descendants.

The first formal criterion seems to be universally accepted - that the deceased have a good death. A person who dies in tragic circumstances, or away from the family, such as a migrant labourer, or someone who is killed violently, or in an accident, or prematurely of a disease, is not considered to have had a good death.<sup>34</sup> In cases like these, the funeral arrangements have to be extra special, in an attempt to mitigate the tragedy of the death. So one often sees really lavish funerals laid on by families who can least afford them. This leads us to the second formal requirement.

Hammond-Tooke writes: "Death alone is not a sufficient condition for being an ancestor entitled to receive worship. Proper burial, with the correct funerary rites, performed by the socially appropriate person, is a *sine qua non*."<sup>35</sup> The second formal

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34. It is mostly for this reason that many South Africans consider Jesus not eligible for consideration as an ancestor. He suffered a violent death, hanged as a criminal rejected by political and religious leadership. This logic has been applied also to victims of political oppression in South Africa. In considering whether Christ might be considered as an ancestor, or a brother-ancestor, Shorter enunciates the following principle: "One must, after all, be true to anthropological fact, if the theological exercise is to be valid." It fulfils no purpose to stretch the category of ancestor so much, that it eviscerates it of any meaning, simply in order to find an African category for Christ.

35. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "Ancestor Religion," in *Ancestor Religion in South Africa: Proceedings of a Seminar on Ancestor Belief*, edited by Heinz Kuckertz (Lumko, Transkei: Lumko Missiological

criterion is thus that there be funerary rites appropriate to the status of a deceased person. These rites must be visible so that everybody concerned can see that they are being performed according to tradition. The deceased person must also be left with no doubt that the appropriate prescriptions were observed on his or her behalf.<sup>36</sup>

For example, if a person dies away from home, his or her spirit must be brought back home in order to be at rest. This is done ritually by a responsible person who goes to the place of the death, and talks to the spirit of the deceased, informing him or her that he has come to bring the deceased home. Traditionally this was done by dragging a branch back from the place of death to the homestead or cemetery where the deceased person was to rest. Obviously in modern times, with people dying great distances from their homes, it is not possible to drag branches. So other ritual are devised to perform the same function.

Nor are the rituals necessarily completed when the body is laid in an appropriate grave, in an appropriate location. The rites continue with the due observation of a determined period of mourning and further rituals after the conclusion of that period.<sup>37</sup>

The moral criterion does not appear to be universally recognised. It is not necessary for a person to have lived a good life, or to have transmitted ancestral morality. Fortes is quite clear that the function of the cult of the ancestors is to preserve the jural relations in families. It is not about recognising good or bad people, or continuing affective relationships. It is a duty. The ancestor may have been a complete rogue, but still the cult must be performed. Or a deceased person may have been a paragon of virtue, but has

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Institute, 1981), 24.

36. Because funerals are public affairs and most of what happens is observable without too much intrusion, anthropologists have been able to study these in some depth. There is thus a substantial body of material describing funerals throughout Southern Africa, as well as interpretations of the meaning of these actions. The route through which many outside observers have access to African tradition is by asking informants: "Why do you do that?" or "What does that mean?"

37. For example, C. Masilo Lamla, "The Dead: Prepared to Live in the Spirit World," in *Ancestor Religion in South Africa: Proceedings of a Seminar on Ancestor Belief*, edited by Heinz Kuckertz (Lumko, Transkei: Lumko Missiological Institute, 1981), 14–21, describes "The making of an ancestor: Southern Nguni mortuary rites and formal incorporation into the spirit world." He writes how the ritual of *ukubuyisa ithongo* is performed 'two or more years after death.'

no descendant of a particular lineage, so has no ancestral cult directed towards him or her.<sup>38</sup>

The juridical criterion seems to be the one on which most authorities agree: To be an ancestor, one must have descendants. To indicate what a problem childlessness is, Kemdirim writes that it represents no heirs in the present life and no future in the next life, and is thus a cause of worry and concern:

In most African cultures, child birth is seen as one of the essential requirements for a befitting burial. Childless couples, therefore, feel that they will miss it. Even more disturbing is the belief that these couples can neither reincarnate (having no offspring or surviving families into which their spirits can be born) nor be regarded as ancestors in the true sense of the word. They do not have children who will pour libation to them.

The overriding concern of childless couples is that there will be no one to uphold the family lineage and inheritance after the couple's death. As a result, the man, in particular, is in perpetual agony and worry at the mere thought that nobody will answer his name after his death and inherit his property.<sup>39</sup>

As I have shown, Fortes insists that the cult of the ancestors is about the extension of jural relationships. That is why the cult of the ancestors follows particular lines of descent - matrilineal, patrilineal or bilateral, according to the specific tradition of each group. Michalek sees the cult of the ancestors primarily in terms of a person's own identity. "*L'homme africain est avant tout descendant d'un Ancêtre. Cette filiation doit se déterminer socialement et non seulement biologiquement.*"<sup>40</sup> This can be expressed as "I am because I belong" and is central to people's self-understanding in South Africa. This is expressed in a proverb: "*Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang*" or a person is a person in,

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38. Fortes, "Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship," 134.

39. Protus O. Kemdirim, "A Call to the Church in Africa to Address the Plight of Childless Couples," *AFER* 38, no. 4 (August 1996): 241. The notion of reincarnation is not of relevance to Africans in South Africa, but the thought of not having descendants to respond to one when one is dead, is a major concern.

Kemdirim is obviously writing about married couples who have not been able to have children. But often young men seem unable to wait for marriage in order to assure the future of their lineage. I would imagine, without any evidence to support it, that this concern is one of the contributing factors to a very high rate of teenage pregnancies in South Africa.

40. Michalek, "*Christ et Ancêtre*," 196.

through, and because of other people. Nobody's identity is separate from those people to whom he or she belongs.

Thus, returning to the juridical criterion, a person who has died young is not considered an ancestor because he or she has not transmitted life. This is why children may traditionally be buried by their mothers without a mourning period or further rituals. They are not candidates for being ancestors and there are no prescribed rituals in their regard.<sup>41</sup>

Erasmus extends this to all deceased young, unmarried males among the Sotho and Xhosa. "Because deceased, young, unmarried male people cannot transmit a direct (vertical) link with earthly descendants (due to a lack of it), their name cannot 'live' after their death and they cannot become ancestors and are therefore excluded from any cosmological importance regarding personhood."<sup>42</sup> Erasmus says this is because it is seen as a 'cosmological duty' to procreate and thus to extend the line of the founding male ancestors of a family or clan. Failing to do so, makes a person not merit ancestor status, and thus cosmologically insignificant.<sup>43</sup>

This consideration brings us neatly to the following section of cosmology, or as I will call it 'worldview.' I will consider how integrally ancestors feature in the overall picture of the world, of which they form part. They are part of a world which has historically known a god, as well as numerous other spiritual realities, and in which intelligent beings

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41. This is not to say that they are buried without emotion or ceremony. Any parent is distressed at the death of a child, and rituals are there to help the survivors, as much as to "effect" a ritual transition. It is just to say that from the perspective of the ancestral cult, a child does not require particular rituals. However, one of Nxumalo's informants said that in times of crisis she speaks to all deceased members of her family, not distinguishing between adult and child. See Nxumalo, "Zulu Christians and Ancestor Cult," 67. This shows how mistaken it is to expect hard and fast rules in a popular cult.

42. P.A. Erasmus, "Perspectives on Black Masculinity: The Abortion Debate in South Africa," *South African Journal of Ethnology* 21, no. 3 (1998): 204.

43. Erasmus does not amplify on what he means by "cosmological importance regarding personhood." I take it to mean that in the worldview (cosmology) in which continuing the ancestral line of the family or clan is paramount, having no descendants nullifies one's personal significance. This does not mean that the life of the deceased person was of 'cosmic' insignificance -- a much more value-laden judgement.

play a vital role in causation, and have a somewhat undetermined place.

### (5) Worldview of the Ancestors

John Mbiti opens his *African Religions and Philosophy* with the assertion: “Africans are notoriously religious, . . .”<sup>44</sup> While it may be the case that African people traditionally lived in a world of magic and spirits, this is no longer uniformly the case. Many Africans have accepted Western scientific paradigms and no longer live in a cosmos of divinities, spirits, totems, mythical creatures and familiars. However, when the Western science fails, as it invariably does at times of crisis and social stress, many Africans return to traditional religious discourse to make sense of the crisis. AIDS presents one of these times of crisis, when people return to find strength and meaning in a traditional worldview.

The cult of the ancestors belongs within a larger traditional worldview or cosmology. It is not our purpose to analyse this cosmology in depth, as this has been done in a number of publications. For detailed descriptions of the cosmology within which the cult operates, the reader is referred to Hammond-Tooke,<sup>45</sup> Ramashapa,<sup>46</sup> Bereng,<sup>47</sup> Manyeli<sup>48</sup> and Malan.<sup>49</sup> However, it is useful at this stage to illustrate that belief in ancestors is inseparable from belief in a supreme god, as well as in other spirits. I shall conclude these considerations on the ancestral worldview with the notion of causality that differs from the Western scientific paradigm, and with a note on where ancestors are

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44. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

45. Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit.”; and W.D. Hammond-Tooke, “World View I: A System of Beliefs,” in *The Bantu Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa*, edited by W.D. Hammond-Tooke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Second Edition, 1974), 318–43; and Hammond-Tooke, *Boundaries and Belief*.

46. J.M. Ramashapa, “Northern Basotho Worldview: A Theological Reflection,” *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 37, no. 2 (1996): 352–59.

47. Patrick Mohlalefi Bereng, *I Am a Mosotho* (Moriya: Morija Printing Works, 1982).

48. Thomas Lesaoana Manyeli, *Religious Symbols of the Basotho* (Mazenod: Mazenod Printing Works, 1963).

49. J.S. Malan, “The Cosmological Factor in Development Programmes,” *South African Journal of Ethnology* 11, no. 2 (1988): 61–66.

thought to live.

(a) God

Despite assertions to the contrary,<sup>50</sup> Africans historically believed in a single supreme god. I shall here consider arguments for and against the notion that this traditional African god is the same as the God proclaimed by the missionaries. I will consider mainly the missionary work among the Basotho, although it must be emphasized that similar research into the history of the awareness of a god or God can be done for the other ethnic and cultural groups in South Africa.

Linguistic arguments show that names and thus the notion of a supreme god pre-existed the arrival of missionaries. Worger<sup>51</sup> analyses early dictionaries and records of nineteenth-Century missionaries to show that *Molimo*, *uNkulunkulu* or *uMvelinqangi* and *uThixo* were the names given to this god by the Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa respectively. The missionaries found these names to be conveniently applicable to the God of the Christians whom they were proclaiming. In each case, these became the adopted name of God in South Africa.<sup>52</sup>

As a missionary Oblate, Laydevant saw that the Basotho distinguished between the ancestors and God. In times of need, the ancestors are ritually called upon to intercede on behalf of their descendants with the supreme god. In an often-quoted analysis of an often-quoted poem, Laydevant says that the verse “New god, pray to the old god.”<sup>53</sup> is evidence of an ancient Sotho practice of asking the ancestor (new god) to

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50. “*Bien que ces pauvres païens ne croient pas à un seul et vrai Dieu, ils sont pourtant adonnés à diverses superstitions.*” writes Fr. Maeder in *Journal de la Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris* 30 (1855): 44.

51. William H. Worger, “Parsing God: Conversations About the Meaning of Words and Metaphors in Nineteenth-Century Southern Africa,” *Journal of African History* 42 (2001): 417–47, <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/bin/bladerunner?pdf> viewed on 19 August 2003.

52. Maeder suggests that the missionaries did not necessarily want to adopt these ready-made names for God. He gives the impression that there was no suitable alternative: “*La langue sessouto n’a pas d’autre mot pour exprimer le nom de Dieu que Morimo, qui est le singulier de Merimo.*” See Fr. Maeder, *Journal de la Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris* 30 (1855): 44.

53. “*Molimo o mocha, rapela oa khale.*” This poem is quoted, for example, in François Laydevant,

intercede on behalf of the people to the supreme god (old god). Laydevant writes: “*Ils avaient une croyance vague en une divinité suprême qu’ils appelaient le Dieu Ancien, par rapport aux dieux nouveaux qui n’étaient autres que les mânes des ancêtres.*”<sup>54</sup>

Elsewhere he argues that the god whom the missionaries found among the Basotho was accepted to be the Christian God. “*Ce Dieu ancien a toujours été considéré par les Basotho comme étant le même que le Dieu des missionnaires.*”<sup>55</sup> This is the strongest argument in this direction.

More recent writers, whose work I shall proceed to examine, are reluctant to find an identity between the two gods.

In his doctoral thesis, Setiloane<sup>56</sup> says that what he learned about the Christian God differs from his radically Sotho-Tswana experience of *Modimo*. He looks at the attributes of the Christian God and of *Modimo* recorded in poems and praise-songs, and concludes that it is clear that they are not the same. For example, *Modimo* was not traditionally considered to have been the creator. Nor was cult rendered to *Modimo*. So, Setiloane distinguishes between *Modimo* and God throughout his work, by using the impersonal pronoun ‘IT’ for *Modimo*.

In his resumé of the appropriation of the name ‘*Modimo*’ into Christianity, Chidester<sup>57</sup> looks at the works of early nineteenth-Century explorers, naturalists, missionaries and administrators. He shows that the naturalist William Burchell, who was among the earliest explorers to record mention of *Modimo*, among the “Bachapin,” understood their *Modimo* to be a powerful demon, and that the people had no religion.<sup>58</sup>

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“*La poésie chez les Basuto,*” *Africa* 3, no. 4 (1930): 232 as a basis for analysing the religious ideas of the Basotho.

54. François Laydevant, “*Étude sur la famille en Basutoland,*” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 1, no. 1 (1931): 232.

55. François Laydevant, “*Idées religieuses des anciens Basotho,*” in *Basutoland* (Namur, Paris, Berne: Editions Grand Lacs, 1949), 27.

56. Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: AA Balkema, 1976), 79.

57. David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 180–82.

58. See William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa (2 Vols.)* (London: Longman,

Similarly, Chidester quotes Andrew Geddes Bain, a hunter-artist, writing that the Sotho-Tswana applied the term *Modimo* to himself, because of his extraordinary power of making things come alive on paper.<sup>59</sup>

Conradie writes:

*Molimo*<sup>60</sup> is the supreme being which lives somewhere in an underground cave, and which is always inclined to do mischief to people. It is an invisible evil spirit, a merciless master who is to blame for all their [the Basotho's] suffering and misfortune. . . . In general the Basotho only attributed bad characteristics to *Molimo*.<sup>61</sup>

Rolland writes of Modimo as the same kind of punishing, vindictive spirit with unlimited power, who does not forgive unless propitiated by sacrifice. However he

Hurst, Reese, Orme, Brown & Green, 1824), 2:550. I have not verified this source for myself.  
59. See Andrew Geddes Bain, *Journeys to the North* (1826), 31, reprinted by the Van Ribeeck Society, Cape Town (1945). I have not been able to verify this for myself.

60. To add to the confusion of the reader coming across Sotho terms for the first time, there are orthographic considerations. Sotho orthography was not standardised until the mid-20th Century. This standardisation is in fact not total, as there are two orthographies currently in general use: one in the Republic of South Africa, and the other in the Kingdom of Lesotho, shaped by English and French missionaries respectively.

In an ancient, occasionally-encountered orthography, an 'r' is used before an 'i' or a 'u' to represent the sound of a 'd.'

In the current Lesotho orthography, the most likely sources of potential confusion are: the sound 'd' is represented by the letter 'l' before an 'i' or a 'u.' The semivowel 'y' is represented by the letter 'e' before an 'e' and an 'o.' The semivowel 'w' is represented by the letter 'o' before an 'a,' and an 'o.' An aspirated 's' is represented by the diacritical 'š.'

In the current South African orthography, the explosive 'ch' is represented by the letters 'tjh.' Thus, to take one example that will frequently be encountered in the present work, the words '*Modimo*', '*badimo*' and '*medimo*' are written '*Molimo*', '*balimo*' and '*melimo*' or '*Morimo*', '*barimo*' and '*merimo*' depending on the orthography being used by the writer. Since both the Mazenod and Morija Presses are in Lesotho, they publish in the Lesotho orthography. The newspapers *Moelets' oa Basotho* and *Leselinyana la Lesotho* are published at Mazenod and Morija, respectively, so always use the Lesotho orthography, although they have a wide readership in South Africa. For the sake of accuracy, in this thesis, any citations are copied exactly as they appear in the original text.

For the sake of ease and consistency, when I am writing, I always use the South African orthography. I believe this orthography is more intuitive for a reader of English, as it is closer to standard English orthography.

For more information on the language and orthographies, the reader is referred to the websites [Http://www.sesotho.web.za](http://www.sesotho.web.za) and [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesotho\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesotho_language) viewed on 22 December 2003.

61. H.N. Conradie, "*Die Basoeto-gewoontes, godsdiens, ens,*" *Die Basuin* 1, no. 3 (July 1930): 6. "*Molimo is die opperwese wat ergens in 'n onderaardse grot woon en wat maar altyd geneig is om die mens kwaads te doen. Dit is 'onsigbare bese gees, 'n genadelose meester aan wie hulle al hul lyding en teenspoed te wyte het. . . . Maar oor die algemeen het die Basoeto's net slegte eienskappe aan Molimo toegeskryf.*"

continues: "The term *Modimo* has been adopted by the Missionaries to translate the word God, and appropriately so, as the ultimate ancestor or father is necessarily the oldest God of God of gods."<sup>62</sup>

Manyeli<sup>63</sup> argues on the basis of the existence of the word *Molimo*, on the existence of burial rites, and on an analysis of the myth of *Kholumo-lumo* that the Basotho had a God before the arrival of the missionaries. He writes that the root of the word *molimo* is *-limo*, meaning sky, heaven, elevated or above. Thus the divinity to which "*molimo*" refers, is remote, inaccessible, in the heavens, inactive in daily life, and not the object of cult. There are thus active *balimo* which eclipse the *molimo* in terms of seeing to the daily needs of the people.

Nürnbergger is emphatic that the God of the missionary proclamation is not the *Modimo* of the ancient Basotho.<sup>64</sup> He cites three reasons for his assurance:

- (i) *Modimo* does not speak and thus has given no self-revelation.
- (ii) The Basotho had no cult or worship of *Modimo*.
- (iii) *Modimo* does not act, and is thus not the 'God of history.'<sup>65</sup>

Thus, says Nürnbergger, *Modimo* is not experienced in any personal manner, and is ethically neutral. This is why impersonal, rather than personal concords are used when speaking of *Modimo*. It is mistaken to identify the supreme god of the Basotho with the God of Christian proclamation.

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62. Emile Rolland, "Note by the Rev. Emile Rolland," *Folk-Lore Journal* 1, no. 5 (September 1879): 115.

63. Manyeli, *Religious Symbols of the Basotho*, Chapter 3.

64. See Klaus Nürnbergger, "The Sotho Notion of the Supreme Being and the Impact of the Christian Proclamation," *Journal of Religion in Africa* VII, no. 3 (1975): 174–200.

65. Nürnbergger insists that the prayers are offered to the ancestors in their own right and not in terms of potential intercession with a further authority. The notion of intercession, is akin to the (particularly) Catholic cult of the saints, which Nürnbergger perceives to displace Christ as the only mediator between God and people.

See Klaus Nürnbergger, "Ancestors and Christ: The Power of the Dead or the Risen Christ - Make up Your Mind!" *Woord en Daad* 36, no. 355 (Autumn 1996): 11–12 and Klaus Nürnbergger, "The Power of the Dead or the Risen Christ - Make up Your Mind!" in *The Church and African Culture: Conference Papers*, edited by Mohlomi Makobane, Bongani Sithole, and Matheadira Shiya (Lumko, Germiston: Mazenod Institute, 1995), 158–62.

From the considerations above, it is evident that whatever the original referent of the term '*Modimo*' might have been, it was not the God of the missionaries. The traditional names of the supreme god were taken by the Christian missionaries and applied to the God of their proclamation. However, it is also evident that in over a century-and-a-half of Christianity among indigenous South African people, the original god has not lost all of its original attributes. There remain notions of god which better fit the ancestral worldview. Principal among these is that of a *deus absconditus* or *deus otiosus*. This god is not involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world and thus leaves significant space for the activity of spirits in mediating fortune and misfortune.

#### (b) Other spirits

In the ancestral worldview, God and the ancestors are not the only populace of the spirit world. Hammond-Tooke<sup>66</sup> writes of local and nature spirits, which are *ad hoc* rather than systematic beliefs, in the sense that they are specific to particular people or areas. They inhabit groves or are associated with particular rocks or pools in a river. Their presence is of significance to the particular group, for reasons associated with the particular spirit.

In answering the question of the source of suffering and evil, it is not always appropriate to blame the ancestors. Much evil is attributed to sorcerers or witches who act alone or through the medium of a familiar.<sup>67</sup> Ramashapa writes:

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66. Hammond-Tooke, "World View I," 321–24.

67. Kiernan acknowledges that witches are one source of evil and suffering: "Evil is therefore predominantly translated as an anti-social capacity or tendency of social persons and is ideally personified in the witch." See Jim Kiernan, "The 'Problem of Evil' in the Context of Ancestral Intervention in the Affairs of the Living in Africa," *Man (N.S.)* 17 (June 1982): 287. Kiernan also understands non-linear (as opposed to descent-group) ancestors and maternal ancestors to be directly responsible for illness and suffering. It is the duty of the descent-group ancestors to protect their descendants. They may withdraw this protection in certain cases, but never directly cause harm. These considerations will become relevant in our considerations of an ancestral aetiology of AIDS in the fourth chapter of this work.

Aston writes that where there is no explicit indication of sorcery such as a person actually uttering a curse, "the bone-thrower rarely makes specific allegations against anyone in particular. . ." The intention is not to identify a particular source of the sorcery, but rather to pronounce a very vague

Sorcerers (*baloi*) are the persons who cast evil spells on other people. Among the Northern Basotho sorcery (*boloi*) represents all evil and destructive practices, and that is why *boloi* (sorcery) is feared very much by many people; Christians included.<sup>68</sup>

So, writes Hammond-Tooke,<sup>69</sup> there is widespread belief that witches use hyenas, polecats, wildcats, owls, snakes, etc, to do their bidding, as well as “a complex system of bizarre familiars which include *tikoloshe* . . . *impundulu* . . . *ichanti* . . . and *mamlambo* . . .” and finally, zombies.<sup>70</sup>

Next, Hammond-Tooke writes of ‘spirits of affliction,’<sup>71</sup> which are neither ancestors nor witches. They enter and take possession of an individual, who learns to accommodate and control them, by apprenticing herself to a cult leader. This phenomenon is of recent origin in South Africa, says Hammond-Tooke, having arrived in the country in the last century. Hammond-Tooke makes the interesting point that it is mainly women who suffer from spirits of affliction, and it seems to be a mechanism for balancing the concentration on the patrilineal and male interests of the cult of the ancestors.

Stech, a Member of the Berlin Missionary Society, recorded in his diary of 19 October 1877, that the Basotho had names for at least twelve different gods.<sup>72</sup> This

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suggestion that “[t]here is trouble in the village” or “[a] stranger hates you.” He also writes that witches usually “use their powers and medicines for amusement, perverted though this may be.” Their “activities are not immediately dangerous and anti-social, though they may be mischievous and immoral.” See E.H. Ashton, *Medicine, Magic and Sorcery Among the Southern Sotho* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1943), 7f.

Kriel says that among the Northern Sotho, the person identified as responsible for the sorcery should be dealt with in an appropriate way, in order that he or she is no longer to be feared. See J.D. Kriel, “Noord-Sotho-beskouinge oor Medemense as siekteveroorsoekende agente,” *South African Journal of Ethnology* 19, no. 4 (1996): 178. (“Northern-Sotho views regarding fellow human beings as illness-causing agents.”)

68. Ramashapa, “Northern Basotho Worldview,” 357.

69. See Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit,” 161, for a discussion of the spirits used by witches.

70. Belief in witches is so widespread in many communities, that it is a danger for elderly women (and occasionally men) to be marginal or in any way antisocial. The accusation that they are a witch, or practice witchcraft (*boloyi, ubuthakatha*) spreads like wildfire, and they are often the victims of lynching as a scapegoat for the woes of their neighbours.

71. Hammond-Tooke, “The Aetiology of Spirit,” 162–64.

72. Stech, “The Gods of the Basuto,” *Folk-Lore Journal* 1 (1879): 32.

contradicts the belief that they had no god at all. The gods being referred to are all associated with some natural phenomenon, such as water, a bird, a poisonous snake, etc. It is clear that Stech's informants are referring neither to the ancestors nor to a single creator God, the object of missionary proclamation. These gods may be what Hammond-Tooke has called the 'local or nature spirits.'

Finally, among the other spirits, I would classify the Holy Spirit, which, apart from its position in the Holy Trinity of mainline Christian churches, is also the animating principle of numerous indigenous churches.<sup>73</sup> In summary, Hammond-Tooke writes<sup>74</sup> that the Holy Spirit is used as a metaphor of power in these churches, by people who are so disempowered by South Africa's heritage of apartheid. Their rituals harness the language of power from on high, to bring transformation to the lives of the members. Clearly the Holy Spirit is not part of the traditional cosmology of South Africans, as it came with the missionaries. But it does play an important role in the lives of many contemporary South Africans.

### **(6) Conclusion: Causation and Location**

Two notes are important in the conclusion of our consideration of the worldview of the ancestors. The first concerns causation. The second concerns location.

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73. These African Independent Churches (AICs) are alternatively called African Initiated Churches, or African Indigenous Churches. There are some 6000 denominations in South Africa, and are a religious phenomenon that has been the object of much study. The seminal study is the comprehensive description and analysis, Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth, 1948). A more recent sociological work is Martin West, *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City: African Independent Churches in Soweto, Johannesburg* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975). A more recent work by members of an AIC is Absolom Vilakazi, Bongani Mthethwa, and Mthombeni Mpanza, *Shembe, The Revitalisation of an African Society* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986).

Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) is a study of the way in which the Barolong use 'spirit' language in AICs to empower themselves in a situation of disempowerment.

74. Hammond-Tooke, "The Aetiology of Spirit," 164–68.

### (a) Causation

Before the arrival of Western biomedical theories and the theories of physical causation by objects and invisible physical forces, there were indigenous African theories of what makes things happen. Most of these theories involved the agency of some personal intentional power, which was responsible for fortune or misfortune. These theories are not to be scoffed at, as they were known 'to work,' and to offer explanations of what was happening in the African world. They were much more people-centred and community-focussed than their Western scientific counterparts.

#### (i) Impersonal

However, it would be mistaken to believe that Africans had no notion of *impersonal causation*.<sup>75</sup> Hammond-Tooke notes that some substances are believed to have powers of impersonal causation.<sup>76</sup> He writes that among the Basotho, pollution is caused by heat<sup>77</sup> which must be cooled down. And among the Zulu, blackness, *umnyama*, is an explanation of pollution. These sources of contagion act 'automatically' and are attached to states such as widowhood, bearing twins, miscarriage, etc. They do not have moral or personal causes.

#### (ii) Personal

The ancestors are the causative agents *par excellence* in the African worldview. They are generally benevolent towards their descendants and watch over and protect them. Thus, a good harvest, health, wealth, childbirth, multiplication of livestock, a

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75. There is the notion of a diffuse power (*amandla* or *matla* - the rallying cry of the freedom struggle against apartheid) akin to Placide Tempels' 'force vitale.'

Tempels writes: "Tout l'effort des Bantu est orienté vers la puissance vitale. La notion fondamentale de leur conception de l'être est le concept de la force vitale." (Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, translated by A. Rubbens [Elizabethville: Lovania, 1945], Ch. 2, *L'ontologie des Bantu*, 4.a] *La notion de l'être*.) This would be an overstatement of the significance of *amandla* in South Africa. *Amandla* can be harnessed to aid people against difficulties. It is not as well understood as causation by personal agency, because less theoretical work has been done on the meaning and operation of *amandla*.

76. This paragraph is a summary of Hammond-Tooke, "Ancestor Religion," 23.

77. Hammond-Tooke, *Boundaries and Belief* explores in more depth the notion and treatment of heat (ho tjhesa) among the Kgaga.

promotion at work, etc., are all attributable to the intervention of the ancestors.

On occasion, for good reason, an ancestor may withdraw its protective power, and leave a descendant or descendants vulnerable to malevolent spirits or forces. In this case, illness or misfortune may befall them. It is then necessary to find out the reason why the ancestor has withdrawn its protective power, and to remedy the situation.<sup>78</sup>

A member of the affected family will consult a traditional healer who has received his or her calling from the ancestors, and is an expert in these matters. The consultation often involves a ritual of divination in which the healer consults the ancestors to ascertain the cause of the illness or misfortune. Most often the diagnosis is that an ancestor has been neglected, or is displeased with the breach of some taboo. It is then necessary to appease the wrath of the ancestor in order to remedy affairs. This is usually done by means of a family celebration of a ritual sacrifice of the blood of an animal, or of tobacco, beer, grain or some other object desired by the ancestor.

Often, the traditional healer or diviner also operates as a traditional chemist, and prescribes a medicine (*muthi*) to be taken orally, smeared on the body, applied in small cuts to the skin, sprinkled around the house to ward off malevolent spirits, etc.<sup>79</sup>

Frequently in the case of a sick person, the healer prescribes that the family gather

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78. It is because of the ancestors' tendency to withdraw their protective power when they are displeased, that critics of the cult frequently characterize the African's relationship to the ancestors as one of *fear*. The message of Christianity is thus presented as one of liberation from this servile fear.

However, the God of the Christians also wields enormous power. People who do not understand that God's primary relation to people is one of *love*, may also distort their relationship to one of *fear* of God's potential wrath. Thus, as with Christianity, it is a criticism of the distorted way in which some people might live the cult of the ancestors, and not of the cult itself, to say that it is one of fear. Obengo tries to achieve this balance when he writes: "People want to live in harmony with their departed relatives and experience peace among themselves. This anticipation finds fulfillment in regular normalizing of relations with the ancestors." See Obengo, "The Role of Ancestors," 61.

79. Many remedies dispensed at traditional chemists are prescribed for their symbolic potency. Others have been shown to have pharmacological action similar to those of Western medicine. An interesting and growing area of research in South Africa concerns ethnobotany, ethnopharmacology and ethnomedicine. It is not possible to deal with this here, but the interested reader is referred to the website of the National Botanical Institute, <http://www.nbi.ac.za/research/ethnobot.htm> viewed on 10 November 2003. The departments of medicine and botany of a number of universities are also doing research into the curative properties of a number of traditional remedies.

around the patient, in order to perform a healing ritual.<sup>80</sup>

### (b) Location

A final word in this discussion of the ancestral worldview remains to be added about the *location* of the ancestors. Ancestors are said to live in a world much like our own. They inhabit villages not dissimilar from those they knew while alive on the earth.

Opinion is divided over whether the ancestors live in the cattle kraal, in sacred groves, in the heavens, or under the earth, or elsewhere. Part of the confusion arises from attempts at etymological understandings of the term 'ancestor.'

In Sotho, the root *-dimo* means 'up.' So, *hodimo* means above, *mahodimo* means heavens, and the reduplicated *hodimo-dimo* means the highest, etc. So, the reasoning goes, *badimo* (the ancestors) are somehow associated with being above, somewhat akin to a Christian heaven. However, lest one think this is clear, Sanders writes: "The *balimo* were thought to lead much the same sort of existence as the living, but in another world in the bowels of the earth. . . ."<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, in Zulu, the root *-phansi* means 'down.' One of the names for those who have died, and by inclusion, the ancestors, is *abaphansi*. Nxumalo explains the reasoning thus: "The term *ophansi* (plural *abaphansi*, 'those below'), takes the picture from the burial practice of interment. It places the dead literally 'below', *phansi*."<sup>82</sup> So, by this etymological reasoning, the ancestors are associated with the earth.

Acknowledging this confusion, Kiernan writes: "There is little consensus over where dead ancestors reside - underground, in the skies, on the western horizon and so on - but a persistent feature is their *constant attachment to the living space of their*

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80. This ritual might not bring physical relief from the symptoms of the illness, but its effect lies in the way it brings families together, heals relationships, and confronts members with the illness and reconciles them to possible loss.

81. Peter Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 15.

82. Nxumalo, "Zulu Christians and Ancestor Cult," 66.

*progeny*.”<sup>83</sup> Junod believed that the ancestors could be where they wanted by sheer willpower, in order to be close to their descendants.<sup>84</sup> Thus, irrespective of their physical location, the point is that Africans are “living together with the ancestors”<sup>85</sup> who are involved in their day-to-day affairs.

While ancestors are ever present to many people in Southern Africa, the Christian churches have been reluctant to acknowledge this intimacy. Early missionary endeavours sought to eliminate the cult of the ancestors, if not totally, then at least among Christians. In the next chapter I shall examine the history of the relationship between the Christian missionaries and the cult of the ancestors. I shall show that there have been two distinct periods, with vastly different attitudes to the ancestors.

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83. Kiernan, “African Traditional Religions,” 20 (emphasis mine.)

84. Henri A. Junod, *Mental Life*, vol. II of *The Life of a South African Tribe* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 358–61.

85. Triebel, “Living Together with the Ancestors.”